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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 000961

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [ENRG](#) [PINR](#) [IS](#) [IZ](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: LOOKING TO REASSERT A MID-EAST ROLE, INDIA

APPOINTS REGIONAL ENVOY

REF: A. NEW DELHI 940

[1](#)B. 04 NEW DELHI 8053

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt. Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On February 2, the MEA announced the appointment of retired career diplomat Chinmaya Gharekhan as Special Envoy for West Asia and the Middle East Peace Process. In creating this position, the GOI signaled its hope to raise New Delhi's profile in the Gulf, where India has an underdeveloped policy, and hinted at more attention to Iraq following interest in the country's recent elections (ref A). India's energy security is a major GOI focus in the Gulf, but it may be too big an issue for Gharekhan, who has spent much of his diplomatic career in the UN system, and faces competition from Energy Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, who himself is a former Foreign Service Officer, and has been unusually active in projecting India's energy diplomacy. Gharekhan's major expertise in the Middle East stems from having served as UN Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories. End Summary.

Wanted: A More Active Middle East Policy

[1](#)2. (C) In designating Chinmaya R. Gharekhan Special Envoy for West Asia and the Middle East Peace Process, the GOI signaled its recognition of the need for a "big picture view" of the region, former Ambassador Hamid Ansari of the Observer Research Foundation told Poloff. This is the first time in memory, he remarked, that India had appointed such a regional envoy, adding that New Delhi felt the need for someone who can look at the "larger issues that go beyond individual ambassadors." The GOI announced Gharekhan's appointment less than a week after PM Manmohan Singh, in a major address at New Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia University, asserted that India will pursue a "proactive strategy" with the Middle East and highlighted the "long-standing tragedy of the Palestinian people." Iraq will also likely be one of the issues in Gharekhan's portfolio, Ambassador Ansari predicted, but he thought the Envoy's primary function will be to monitor the Middle East peace process, "now that it is moving again." Having served as UN Special Coordinator for the Occupied Territories, Gharekhan was well-qualified to do that, Ansari added.

[1](#)3. (C) The cool reception Foreign Minister Natwar Singh received when he traveled to Egypt in December for Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's funeral (in large part because India decided not to be represented at the head of state level) highlighted the disconnect between India's professed affinity for the region and the reality of underdeveloped relations between New Delhi and Gulf and other Arab states (ref B). "Times of India" Foreign Affairs Editor Indrani Bagchi told Poloff on February 4 that the new position reflects New Delhi's effort to develop a more coherent policy towards the region, and a special envoy will flag issues that "could become big, before they do." Bagchi observed that Gharekhan's appointment represents a further attempt by the MEA to wrest control of Indian foreign policy back from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) following Dixit's death. Under Dixit and NSA Mishra, for instance, relations with Iran and Israel were firmly ensconced in the Prime Minister's Office. She added, however, that although Gharekhan and Natwar are friends, the envoy will report to the PMO.

[1](#)4. (C) The Gharekhan appointment also suggests a desire to rationalize Indian policy towards the NEA region. In a Foreign Ministry bureaucracy dominated by regional joint secretaries, the Middle East is currently dispersed among

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three Joint Secretaries -- Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran (PAI), Gulf, and West Asia/North Africa (WANA). The Gulf portfolio is also responsible for the politically sensitive Haj account, leaving little time for that official to engage in policy innovation.

Iraq in the Envoy's Portfolio?

[1](#)5. (C) Following the January 30 elections in Iraq, India's role and lack of presence there has come under scrutiny in New Delhi (ref A). After his appointment, local media quoted Gharekhan as having said that "the Indian government is very

conscious about taking the close and friendly relations with Iraq forward," citing Iraq's exceptional (among Arab countries) support for India on Kashmir. While Ambassador Ansari insisted that the peace process will dominate Gharekhan's job description, journalist Saeed Naqvi was doubtful, dismissing official suggestions to that end as "clever leaks," and arguing instead that the Envoy will focus on Iraq, beginning with his reaction to the recent elections there.

#### Energy Security

16. (C) India's overriding interest in the Middle East is energy security, with 70 percent of domestic petroleum consumption imported from the region and a growing appetite for fuel. Gharekhan as Envoy, however, is not likely to pursue this issue as part of his responsibilities, according to Bagchi, on the grounds that the issue is too big for the MEA. It may even be too big for Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, a former FSO, who has made energy diplomacy a major part of his priorities. Pulling these bureaucratic fiefdoms together ultimately will require involvement by the Prime Minister himself.

#### Bio Note: More a UN Man

17. (C) A friend of FM Natwar Singh, Gharekhan is a career diplomat who has served as India's Permanent Representative to the UN in New York (1986-1992) and Geneva (1977-1980). He was MEA Joint Secretary for the Pakistan and UN divisions (1980-1983), and an Additional Secretary in Rajiv Gandhi's PMO from 1984 to 1986. After his retirement in 1992, Gharekhan was appointed the UN Secretary General's Personal Representative to the Security Council, and later as Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories from October 1996 to September 1999. In October 2004, Natwar made Gharekhan part of his six-member Policy Advisory Group. After retirement, he also lived for an extended period in Sharon, Connecticut, where his daughter was a doctor. Since returning to Delhi, he has been a regular on the retired Ambassador's circuit, and has been open and accessible to the Embassy.

#### Comment

18. (C) As we work to capitalize on the coincidence of our shared interests with India in the Middle East, Gharekhan's appointment provides another high-level point of interaction in the GOI. We will continue to monitor how the position develops as the MEA and PMO jockey for foreign policy leadership in the aftermath of NSA Dixit's death. An early indicator should be a regional trip that Gharekhan will reportedly take to assess the aftermath of the Iraq elections. In creating Gharekhan's position, New Delhi may be bolstering its ability to engage more substantively in Iraq, but evidence for such a GOI course change is not yet clear.

19. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.  
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